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Congregation Beth Ahabah

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Congregation Beth Ahabah

by Oluchi Chigbu

On Friday, October 23rd 2015 at 7:30 pm, I visited Congregation Beth-Ahabah (House of Love), a Temple in 1109 W Franklin St, Richmond, VA 23220 for Sabbath service. The Temple was a Reform Jewish Temple with Rabbi Martin P. Beifield Jr. as the presiding officer. As this Jewish Congregation was reform, the service wasn't the traditional Jewish service I expected.

I went with a friend as I was extremely nervous about going for a Jewish service alone for the first time. I was raised as a Christian, so this was a completely new experience for me. I was excited to see the different practices and how the services differ. The Temple was in a quiet neighborhood with houses a close proximity to it. As I approached, it almost looked like a church. There were three big, wooden doors at the entrance and a triangle roof. As I walked in, I was welcomed by two very friendly ushers who handed me a prayer book and a bulletin, which had a history of the Temple, the service information, upcoming events, and other things that you would see on a bulletin for a religious service. The ushers asked me if I was visiting for the first time, welcomed me, and led me to a seat. I was already feeling less discomfort.

I was shocked at how stunning and modern inside of the Temple looked. The first thing I noticed was the Alter. The backdrop had pillars lined up like the front of the building and the arc was right under the pillars, with what

looked like a gate securing the Torah scrolls in the arc. There were two Menorahs placed on each side of the Alter and two images of the word "Adonia" in Jewish inscribed and framed on each side of the wall directly facing the pews, where some people were already seated, waiting for the service to begin. The stained glass windows were breathtaking. There was one window with an image of a volcano that was made with actual tiffany. During the course of the service, I looked up and I saw the most beautiful paintings on the ceiling, but I couldn't make out what they were.

I sat in one of the pews and immediately a lady started conversation with me. I explained to her that it was my first time in a Temple and she was more than happy to tell me about the Temple, explain what everything is to me and show me different things like the tiffany stained glass window. She also introduced me to some of her friends. She made me feel relaxed and I no longer felt like I was being scrutinized. There were about 60 people who showed up for service, most of whom were white and male. There were also kids in the service. I felt like this was weird as in my church back home there is a place for kids and one for adults because adults and kids don't understand and process information the same way. However, I like how families sat together. It promoted a sense of community. The people overall looked middle aged and middle classed, with a few elderly people.

There was no dramatic opening for the service. The associate Rabbi welcomed everyone, quite informally which made me feel more relaxed. I had done enough research before my visit to know that what the Rabbis wore on their shoulders is called a Tallis. The Cantor, who is the one that leads worship, sang the opening song in Hebrew. I have to say the singing was my favorite part of the service. I have never heard singing like that. Even though I didn't understand what she sang, the sound alone was enough. Everything she sang was in the prayer book so I could follow along with her. After that was the Candle Blessing and the Kiddush- a blessing recited over wine or grape juice to sanctify the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. A girl was celebrating her Barh'mitzvah in the Temple on that Friday, so she and her family lit the candles on the Alter and said the Candle Blessing and the Kiddush was also recited. Scripture was read and there was more singing from the prayer book. The Rabbi always mentioned what page we were on, which I found helpful. There were readings and songs that were done with everyone standing and some done sitting down. The V'Shamru was read which contained twenty-four Hebrew words said to correspond to the twenty-four hours of Sabbath.

After this, the Rabbi said a prayer of consecration for a new born baby boy. This was almost like a baby dedication and naming ceremony that is performed in my church back home. The whole congregation then said a prayer for the baby and his parents. Then we were asked to stand and sing as the Torah was brought out from the Arc. The Rabbi carried it like a baby, and gently placed it on the pulpit. The cantor then took what looked like a big silver pointer and started to read some verses from the Torah. There was no actual sermon, which

I found quite interesting and different. Another part of the service I especially enjoyed was when the Rabbi said a prayer of healing for anyone whose name was mentioned by members of the congregation.

Lastly, the Cantor led the congregation in a closing song, and refreshments and pastries were served downstairs which I was invited to take part in by the lady I met earlier. I was introduced to even more people who were extremely nice and welcoming. Overall the service had a welcoming, open and relaxed atmosphere. I enjoyed my visit. •

Written Fall 2015. © Oluchi Chigbu.